

A newly released report from the Maryland Department of Human Resources shows progress in child welfare reform. While only three jurisdictions out of 23 counties and Baltimore City reached their goals, improvements were found across the state.

Even Advocates for Children and Youth, a group often critical of the department, said the report was “positive,” and an expert in the field commended the state for putting out the data on its performance.

The 2010 Place Matters report indicates the progress of 23 counties and Baltimore City in increasing the number of adoptions, reducing the number of children in foster care, increasing the number of children placed in family home settings, and decreasing the number of children in group home settings.

The 2010 Place Matters report found that Baltimore City and Kent and Worcester counties had met the four goals initiated in a 2007 reform. In 2009, the first year the report was issued, only one jurisdiction, Baltimore City, had met the goals.

This year, according to Elyn Jones, deputy director of the office of communications, most of the jurisdictions had hit more than one or two of the goals, even if they did not achieve all four. Allegany County, for example, met three of the goals.

The Human Resources Department has a \$2.2 billion annual budget, the fourth largest among state agencies. Of that, \$600 million goes to three child welfare programs: foster care, adoption, and child abuse and neglect.

There was no increase in funding for these programs. However, “there was a change in philosophy,” said Jones, citing foster care as an example.

“We need to move quicker to have a permanent plan for children in foster care,” Jones said. “It should be a temporary safe haven, not a place where children stay for years and years. Without

extra money, we've been able to produce better outcomes in Maryland."

Melissa Rock, child welfare director for Advocates for Children and Youth, called the report "positive." In particular, she applauded the decrease in the number of "out-of-home" placements, a term for foster homes, group homes and residential treatment centers.

ACY had conducted a survey on child welfare issues. The survey asked voters if they supported providing more services to at-risk families to keep children out of the foster care system. The result: 64 percent favored it, 20 percent opposed.

Rock said that the fact the number of children in foster care has dropped should be reflected in additional funding for in-home services. "The public agreed that it makes sense to provide more services for out-of-foster care," she said.

At the University of Maryland School of Social Work, Terry Shaw said that the Place Matters report shows the state's commitment to using data to inform decision-making.

"It is commendable that the state is putting the information out there and recognizing the work the local systems have done. It's a difficult thing for states to do on sensitive topics like child welfare," said Shaw, who has worked in that area in California and in Maryland.

Shaw said that "evidence-based practice" is the trend across the country. "The report is results-oriented and that is one of the cornerstones of evidence-based," he said. "They really looked at the outcomes they thought were important. The whole system will improve as they improve those factors."

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